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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the extent to which American learners of Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) are able to distinguish polite Japanese speech, and the effect of instruction on this skill. Specifically, it looked at performance on a midterm listening comprehension question in which students listened to self-introductory speeches of three job applicants and determined which was the most appropriate candidate for the job, based on content and pragmatic meaning. Focus was on students' judgment of the statements' pragmatic features, particularly degree of politeness. Subjects were 120 college students in 12 second-year class sections taught by eight teachers. The students overwhelmingly chose the applicant who satisfied explicit qualifications, even though the other two applicants used more polite speech, considered an important qualification in Japanese culture. All instructors were surprised by the findings; all would have rejected the applicant the students chose, based on inappropriate use of Japanese pragmatic features. Aspects of classroom instruction that may contribute to students' misunderstanding of these pragmatic features are discussed. Contains 20 references. (MSE)

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Why can't learners of Japanese as a foreign language distinguish polite from impolite speech styles ?

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ED 434 536

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1. Introduction

This study investigates American JFL students' comprehension of pragmatic meaning and the effect of teaching Japanese pragmatics.

In recent years, in second language acquisition research, the role of noticing L2 information (Schmidt, 1990) and the acquisitional function of a focus on form (Long, 1991, Long & Robinson, in press) have been of theoretical importance. While the main focus of this line of research concerns the knowledge of the formal structure of L2, the hypotheses and arguments are applicable to learning L2 pragmatics (Kasper, 1997, Schmidt, 1993). Studying his own second language learning experiences, Schmidt (1993) concludes that successful learning of a second language pragmatics, conscious noticing of linguistic forms, functional meanings and the relevant contexts are necessary. He states:

> Simple exposure to sociolinguistically appropriate input is unlikely to be sufficient for second language acquisition of pragmatic and discoursal knowledge because the linguistic realizations of grapmatic functions are sometimes opaque to

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> language learners and because the relevant contextual factors to be noticed are likely to be defined differently or may be nonsalient for the learner. (1993:36)

Most of the studies on interlanguage pragmatics (e.g., Olshtain and Cohen 1983; Bergman and Kasper 1993; Eisenstein and Bodman 1993; Beebe and Takahashi 1989a; 1989b) and on instructional effect of pragmatic features (e.g., Wildner-Bassett, 1994; Bouton, 1994; Kubota, 1995; House, 1996; Tateyama, Kasper & Mui, 1997) have focused on a particular speech act or acts such as apology, thanks and disagreement by comparing the productions of experimental and control groups. As summarized in Kasper (1997), the studies on the instructional effect of speech acts have found that, in general, explicit instructions are beneficial.

Communicative competence also includes recognition and production of an appropriate speech style or register in a given social context. Typically, a speech style or register is indexed by certain co-occurring features (e.g., Biber 1988; Ervin-Tripp 1972; Gumperz 1982; Ochs 1986). For example, in his studies on interethnic communication, Gumperz (1982) shows that a particular variant of English is signaled by three different grammatical levels, namely phonological, morphological and lexical. He (1982:33) states, "At issue are listener's expectations about what

pronunciations normally go together with what morphological or lexical options". These co-occurring features signal how the referential message should be framed, what the activities are, how the speaker feels toward the addressee and/or the topic of the talk among others. They are referred to as contextualization cues (Gumperz 1982) or as indexicals (Silverstein 1976). Contextualization cues or indexicals include not only phonological, morphological and lexical levels but also syntactic forms, speech acts, fixed expressions and the referential content of messages as well as non-linguistic signs such as facial expressions and gestures. Native speakers expect certain linguistic features to collocate in a certain speech style or register (pragmalinguistic knowledge), and they expect a particular co-occurrence structure to be linked to certain social situations (sociopragmatic knowledge). Such expectations are part of a native speaker's over-all communicative competence. Thus, to communicate in an appropriate manner, native speakers pay attention not only to what is said (the referential content of a message) but also simultaneously to the pragmatic meanings (how it is said). Learning to notice and identify different speech styles appropriate to social contexts is important in learning a foreign language, and it is particularly important in learning languages such as Japanese, Korean and Javanese among others, in which much social information is encoded in rich morphology. To what

extent can learners of a foreign language pay attention to how something is said when they simultaneously focus on what is said? Can learners notice co-occurring linguistic features? Do instructions of these features help them notice them? As far as I know, there has not been any study on L2 learner's comprehension of appropriate speech styles in terms of co-occurring features.

This paper examines the correlation between American JFL students' pragmatic judgment of polite speech (application for a job) and the effect of instruction. It asks the following questions: 1) To what extent do learners notice or not notice co-occurring functions of pragmatic features in a typical foreign language classroom?; 2) To what extent do instructors teach co-occurring pragmatic features either explicitly or implicitly in class?; 3) Is knowledge of instructed pragmatic functions put to use in a specific task?

2. The study

This study specifically investigates a listening comprehension question on a midterm exam given to 201-level Japanese classes at the University of Hawaii at Manoa during the fall semester of 1997.[1] A total of 120 students in 12 sections taught by 8 instructors participated in this study. According to the instructors' subjective reports, 7 sections are average classes, 3 are below average and, 2 are above

average. Thus, overall, the students who participated in this study were average students taking Japanese at the University of Hawaii. In this mid-term question, students are given a help-wanted ad of a clothing company seeking an English-Japanese bilingual clerk. The four qualifications required for this job are to speak polite Japanese, to be able to work during weekends and evenings, to be able to use Excel, and to have knowledge of Japanese fashion trends. Students then hear three short audio-taped self-introductory speeches in Japanese given by applicants applying for this job. Each applicant's speech was played three times. They are asked to choose the most appropriate applicant and write in English the reason why they made that choice. All the instructors were interviewed by the researcher after the results of the midterm exam were given to the students.

The appropriateness of the applicants' speech is judged by what they say (referential content of message) and how they say it (pragmatic meaning). In this question, as I elaborate below, one of the speakers' (applicant A's) speech was problematic in that the referential content of the message did not match the pragmatic meaning indexed by co-occurring linguistic features. On the level of the referential message, applicant A states that she is very good at Japanese, but a collocation of features that serve as a contextualization cue indicate that her speech style is too informal for the occasion. Thus it implicates that her

Japanese is not good enough. Can JFL students notice this pragmatic meaning when the referential content states the opposite? If they do, can they make a pragmatic judgment similar to that of native speakers? In this sense, this exam question offers a good opportunity to investigate JFL students' ability to focus on pragmatic meaning indexed by co-occurring features. Table 1 shows the three applicants' self-reported qualifications (the referential content of the message):

Table 1: Self-reported qualifications of the three applicants

Qualifications	Applicant A (female)	Applicant B (male)	Applicant C (female)
1) Speak polite Japanese	speak well	able to write, speak & read	able to speak but can't read newspaper
2) Work during weekends & evenings	yes	yes	_____
3) Use the computer program Excel	yes	yes (but does not like computers much)	yes (but not skillful)
4) Have knowledge of Japanese fashion trends	yes	_____	interest in fashion

As Table 1 shows, according to the referential content of the message that the three provide, Applicant A qualifies in all respects. In contrast, Applicants B and C impart

information that can be interpreted negatively in the interview context. Applicant B mentions that he does not like computers much, and Applicant C states that her Japanese and computer skills are not so good. In addition, Applicants B and C do not indicate whether or not they have the required qualifications 2 and 4, respectively. Thus, in terms of what they say (referential content of the message), it is clear that applicant A is the best choice.

The appropriate way of presenting oneself in applying for a job in Japanese is constituted by presence and absence of various co-occurring linguistic and non-linguistic features. Since the speech was on audio-recorded tapes in this study, we only consider linguistic features. I call the features that are positively evaluated in this social context "positive features" and those that are negatively evaluated, "negative features". In particular, the more negative features the speech contains, the more inappropriate it is interpreted. Tables 2 and 3 list the characteristics of the three applicants' speech with respect to the linguistic features that convey pragmatic meaning. The positive features include the use of the formal form (*masu* form), which is marked by the morpheme *-masu* on the sentence-final verbal or *desu* as a copula, appropriate fixed expressions, hedges, and honorifics, and the negative features include the plain form on the sentence-final

verbal, the final particles such as *ne* and *yo* and certain contracted forms, all of which make the speech to informal.

Table 2: Positive pragmatic features

	Applicant A (female)	Applicant B (male)	Applicant C (female)
formal form (*masu* form)	inconsistent use of *masu* 6 *masu* forms (5 plain forms)	consistent use of *masu*	consistent use of *masu*
appropriate hedges	no	yes	yes
fixed expression	yes	yes	yes
appropriate honorific	no	yes	yes

Table 3: Negative pragmatic features

	Applicant A (female)	Applicant B (male)	Applicant C (female)
informal form (plain form in the main clause)	5	0	0
final particle	*yo* 3	0	0
contracted form	*teru* 2 *temasu* 1	*teru* 0 *temasu* 0	*teru* 0 *temasu* 0

In a formal presentation, such as a taped-speech for a job application, the use of the formal form (*masu* form) on the sentence-final verbal is the norm. Both applicant B and C consistently use the formal form, but applicant A uses the

informal form (the plain form) three out of nine times on the verbal ending. An assertion of one's strong qualification needs to be modified in Japanese with a hedge even when one applies for a job. Applicant C mentions that she is not skillful in using Excel but will try to improve, which humbles ones own ability but gives a positive future perspective. Humbling one's own ability is an appropriate hedge in applying for a job in Japanese as long as one provides a positive attitude for future improvement. In contrast, applicant A directly asserts her good Japanese language proficiency, her ability t. use Excel and her knowledge about the Japanese fashion trends, all of which are qualifications required for the position. However she asserts her qualifications without an appropriate hedge but with the assertive final-particle *yo* as in *Nihongo wa watashi wa totemo yoku dekimasu yo* `I am very good at Japanese *yo'*, *Excel wa tsukaemasu yo* `I can use Excel *yo'* and *Nihonjin ga donna fashion ga suki ka yoku shitteru yo* `I know well what kind of fashion Japanese like *yo'*. Note that the other applicants do not use the particle *yo* at all. The particle *yo* is not only too informal in this context but also when it occurs with an assertion, it reinforces it. Thus these assertions of applicant A are judged by native speakers as severely inappropriate. It is customary to end the application with a fixed expression such as *doozo*

yoroshiku `Please treat me well' or a slightly more polite version, *doozo yoroshiku onegaishimasu* `I request you to please treat me well'. All the applicants use one of the versions of this fixed expression, but applicants B and C choose the more polite version. Furthermore, if a applicant refers to the prospective employer's action or belongings, or mentions his or her action in relation to the prospective employer, he/she is expected to use honorifics (and dishonorifics) to exalt the prospective employer's action or belonging and humble his/her own action or belongings. While applicants B and C do not mention the prospective employer's action nor their own in relation to it, applicant A does so by saying, *henji mattemasu* `I'm waiting for your reply'. She does not exalt the prospective employer's reply with the honorific prefix *o-* as in *o-henji* `honorable reply' nor does she humble her own action of waiting with the humble form *o-machi shite orimasu* `I am humbly waiting'. In a formal context such as applying for a job by sending a recorded-speech, certain contracted forms sound too informal. One of them is the form *-teru* which is a contraction of the progressive/stative construction, *-te iru* (verbal gerund form *-te* + verb *to be*). Applicant A uses the progressive/stative construction three times in her speech and two times she chooses the contracted form *teru* while

applicants B and C use the more appropriate non-contracted form, with combination of the *masu* form as in *-te imasu*.

3. Results

As shown in Table 4, out of 120, overwhelming 97 students (80.8%) chose applicant A, 17 (14.2%), applicant C, and 6 (5%), applicant B. The main reason for choosing applicant A was that, according to the referential content of the three applicants' speech, she satisfied all the qualifications.

Table 4: Distribution of students' choice

Applicant A	Applicant B	Applicant C	total
97	6	17	120
80.8%	5%	14.2%	100%

Table 5: Students' reasons for choosing applicant A with respect to her Japanese proficiency

#1 Positive evaluation of A's Japanese skill	68
(A is very good at Japanese)	(60)
(other positive comments)	(8)
#2 No mention of A's good Japanese skill	23
#3 Negative evaluation of A's Japanese skill	6
Total	97

Table 5 shows that 97 students who chose applicant A are categorized into three groups. Group #1 consists of 68 students who evaluated positively applicant A's Japanese skill. Out of them, 60 students specifically mentioned that applicant A is very good at Japanese, which is a literal translation of her self-reported statement (*Nihongo wa watashi wa totemo yoku dekimasu yo*). Since one of the job requirements was an abilty to speak polite Japanese, we assume that when these students commented that A is very good at Japanese and did not offer any negative comment on her speech style, they judged her manner of speech to be polite enough. One of the students even commented that A's manner of speaking is very polite. Or these students mistakenly equated speaking Japanese well with speaking Japanese politely. Another 8 students positively commented on A's Japanese. Their comments such as "A displays politeness", "A learned polite Japanese" and "A's Japanese sounds very good" reflect that they failed to notice A's inappropriate manner of speaking. Thus, apparently, 68 students in group #1 did not notice the pragmatic meaning indexed by the linguistic features listed in Tables 2 and 3. Group #2 consists of 23 students who did not specifically mention applicant A's good Japanese skill. They either stated that applicant A can speak Japanese or that she studied Japanese for 2 years in college. It is not clear

whether they noticed applicant A's inappropriate speech style. If they did, they certainly could not judge it as a crucially negative factor for applying for a job. Group 3 consists of 6 students who negatively evaluated applicant A's Japanese skill or style but still chose her as the most suitable applicant because of the other qualifications. This indicates that they do not understand that in applying for a job in Japanese, an inappropriate speech style is problematic even when the other qualifications are good.

4. Discussion

4.1. Accessibility of co-occurring pragmatic functions

None of the eight instructors whom I interviewed expected this outcome at all. They were unanimously surprised at it. For them, it was obvious that applicant A's speech style was definitely inappropriate for applying for a job. In the instructors' words, applicant A is "out of the question". In the instructors' judgment, applicant C is the most suitable for the position, and applicant A is by far the worst. They thought that most students would choose either applicant B or C.

Apparently, the instructors negatively evaluated applicant A's speech based on her inappropriate use of the pragmatic features listed in Tables 2 and 3 rather than the referential content. As a part of the communicative competence, we assume that these co-occurring features are

simultaneously accessible to the instructors. Are these features accessible to the students, too? The data of the present study indicate that that is not the case. Out of 120 students, the 68 students in group #1 apparently did not notice applicant A's inappropriate speech style indexed by the linguistic features discussed above. They must have made the choice solely by the referential content of the speech listed in Table 1, which indicates that the pragmatic information was not accessible to them. The 23 students in group #2 may or may not have noticed A's inappropriate speech style. If they did not, they did not have access to the pragmatic functions of the co-occurring features, either. Even if they did, they could not correctly interpret the pragmtic meaning indexed by the collocation of the features. Or it is possible that the students in groups #1 and 2 misunderstood what it was that they were supposed to judge. The 6 students in group #3 noticed A's inappropriate speech style, but they did not understand that in applying for a job in Japanese, the informal speech style is unacceptable no matter how good the other qualifications are. In fact, only 6 students who chose applicant B or C specifically made a negative evaluation of applicant A's speech. They clearly noticed and judged it inappropriate in terms of the pragmatic meaning. The judgments made by the students in groups #2 and #3 may be due to a negative transfer from L1 culture in which self-assertion in applying

for a job is valued, sounding sure of oneself is a very important asset, and what counts more is what is said rather than how it is said.

The fact that at least more than half the students failed to notice the pragmatic meaning in the listening comprehension test suggests that average students at the 201-level focus on the referential content of the message and barely pay attention to the pragmatic meaning indexed by collocations of linguistic features. This raises the question of effect of instruction.

4.2. The effect of instruction

To what extent and how were the co-occurring pragmatic features that constitute an appropriate formal speech style for a job application taught in the class and what exactly were the instructions given the students on that test item? The interviews with the instructors indicate that among pragmatic features listed in Tables 2 and 3, the only one that was explicitly and implicitly taught by all the instructors at the 201-level is the distinction between the *masu* and plain forms. They teach the functions of these forms in role plays and conversation drills. In fact, prototypical uses of these forms are first introduced in the textbook at 101-level and mentioned throughout the textbook whenever relevant conversations appear. For this reason, the

instructors assumed that students would be able to notice any use of the plain form and judge it as inappropriate for a formal occasion such as applying for a job. Furthermore, five instructors report that their students ask about the appropriate use of the *masu* and plain forms in class, especially when they make a skit or perform a role play. This indicates that some students are consciously aware of this distinction when they have time to think about it but may not notice it in a listening comprehension task.

The instructors' reports on their classroom instruction reveal that the other pragmatic markers listed in Tables 2 and 3 are more or less inaccessible to the instructors' consciousness. Hence, these features are not brought to the conscious attention of their students. Only one instructor mentioned a lack of an appropriate hedge in applicant A's speech. The instructor who mentioned a lack of a hedge also noted the inappropriate use of the particle *yo*. The fact that students are explicitly taught only the functions of *masu* and plain forms suggests that when the judgment of the speech style relies on several co-occurring features, explicit instructions of one pragmatic function is not sufficient to make average JFL learners notice and judge social appropriateness of that style.

[The instruction given on the exam sheet states, "Listen to the taped self-introductions of three applicants.

Select the most qualified for the job advertised belwo and wirte a report to your supervisor--IN ENGLISH--explaining why you have chosen that particular applicant." The students were not told by the instruction that in applying for a job in Japanese how one speaks weight more than what he/she says. Thus, it is possible that most of them did not pay close attention to the pragmatic meaning of the applicants' speech.

4.3. Role of motivation

If we look at the different section (i.e. classes) of Japanese instruction, we see that the results of section 1 were markedly different from those of the rest. In this section, out of 10 students only 2 chose applicant A while 6 chose applicant C and two, applicant B. Furthermore, 5 students who chose applicant B or C noted that applicant A's speech style was neither polite nor humble. In other words, half the class clearly noticed and was able to judge applicant A's inappropriate use of the pragmatic markers. This section was taught by instructor T, who when necessary, gave explicit instructions on both the functions of *masu* and plain forms and the final particles such as *yo*. Instructor T also taught another section (section 2), in which 5 students out of 7 (71%) chose applicant A. She taught both sections exactly in the same method and manner. Thus the better

performance of section 1 can not be attributed to the instructor's teaching method. The difference between the two sections was that while section 2 was an average class, section 1 consisted of many exceptionally highly motivated students. Many students in section 1 were interested in Japanese culture and some had a strong desire to visit Japan. A contrastive study of the results of sections 1 and 2 suggests that highly motivated students notice pragmatic functions that are taught.

5. Conclusion

The data from the students' answers and the instructors' reports indicate the following:

1) Information on the pragmatic functions of several co-occurring linguistic forms are simultaneously available to instructors to make judgments on speech styles. However, the instructors are not consiously aware of all of them. As a result, most of these features were not explicitly taught in class.

2) Apparently, a full range of such information is not accessible to the students. Only one of the features is explicitly taught to 201-level students

3) Given a listening comprehension task, over 80% of the students in average JFL classes neither noticed nor judged a pragmatic function of a linguistic form even when it was explicitly taught in class. Students who positively

evaluated applicant A's speech concentrated on the referential content and failed to pay attention to the pragmatic information. However, it is not clear in this study whether the saliency of the referential content or the students' negative transfer of a specific L1 social behavior (avoiding hedges when promoting oneself) is responsible for their poor performance.

4) Strong intrinsic motivation seems to play a role in noticing pragmatic features that are taught.

This study strongly suggests that when a co-occurring pragmatic features constitute a particular style of speaking, teaching of one of the features is not sufficient. It raises questions that need to be investigated in future research. These include:

1) Why on a listening comprehension task don't average JFL students notice a pragmatic feature which has been taught to them? Is the reason cognitive or socio-cultural? In other words, is the failure to notice and judge the function of a pragmatic feature due to cognitive salience of the referential content of the message? Or is it due to negative transfer from the students' L1 culture?

2) In what ways is the role of motivation helpful in noticing pragmatic features that have been taught?

3) The present study suggests that in order to understand the pragmatic meaning of a speech style, average JFL students need to know the full range of co-occurring

linguistic forms and their pragmatic functions which constitute various speech registers as well as their specific cultural norms of interpretation. Unlike a speech act, which is readily accessible to the instructor's consciousness, a range of co-occurring features such as those discussed in this study is more subtle and often beyond the consciousness of average native speakers. In this sense, it is more difficult to bring it to the instructor's attention. Is the full-range of co-occurring features teachable in a JFL class? If so, what is the relative effect of different instructional approaches?

4) Will the results of the exam significantly improve if students were specifically instructed to pay attention to how the applicants speak? If so, making students notice at least one pragmatic feature that is taught out of the several that constitute a particular speech style helps them judge appropriateness.

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Notes

[1]. This midterm exam. question was not initially designed for this study. It was intended for a listening comprehension question. After the exam. was administered, the researcher decided to use the results as data for this study for they would provide natural data to investigate the JFL students' comprehension of a speech style and instruction effect.